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# The changing career of luxury: From moral threat to material well-being

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**ABSTRACT:** The elusive nature of luxury and its history have been discussed for thousands of years. Previously known to be for the rich and famous, it could be argued that luxury is a moral threat to society, bringing about social divides and tension. But what is the real meaning of luxury? What was once a threat can now be considered to assist with well-being. This article discusses the historical developments of the phenomenon of luxury.

**KEYWORDS:** Aristotle, demoralisation, desire, Hume, virtue

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Some ideas are elusive. Luxury is a case in point. It is indicative of its elusiveness that, historically speaking, its effective meaning has not remained constant. To read, for example, the Roman historian Sallust (1971) on the insidious danger of luxury alongside the celebratory enticements to stay in a luxury hotel is to be presented with two very different sets of assumptions. This difference can be informatively illuminated by observing how the meaning of "luxury" has changed from being a morally charged threat to virtue to being a morally acceptable synonym for material well-being and enjoyment, like a stay in The Ritz.

From the Greeks through to the Romans (especially) and on into Christianity and the Renaissance, luxury belongs in a generically moralised vocabulary. Cicero (1913, I.30) conveniently summarises the context. He juxtaposed a frugal life of temperance, sobriety and austerity that is worthy or *honestum* with a life of luxury and softness that is corrupt or *turpe*. Frugality, poverty and the like were virtues that embodied the conduct of a "natural life" — a life *kata phusin* or *secundum naturam*. Elsewhere, Cicero (1927, V.35) declares it to be self-evident that nature's requirements are few and inexpensive. The "natural life" is the "simple" or Christian ascetic life, where meeting the needs for food, shelter and clothing is easy because they are finite or possess a "natural limit" (i.e. "eat to live"). Those who live simply will not be poor because they are not "in need". Conversely, it is only those who have exceeded nature's bounds who feel "poor" and that is because they desire more (i.e. "live to eat"). Once the natural limit is passed then there is no resting place since the "unnatural" has no terminus (see Seneca, 1932, #16).

Desires in general and those for luxuries a fortiori were judged a threat on both an individual and social level. Regarding the former, there is a somatic focus. This has remained and it is a central part of the history of luxury that from being negative this focus has become a positive. On the classical view, the definitive characteristic of desires that focus on the body is that they are boundless. For example, Seneca (1932, #119) disparages the

enjoyment of fine food. To give one of his examples, bread made from inferior flour assuages hunger as effectively as that baked from better quality ingredients; the purpose of food is to fill the stomach, not indulge it. From this perspective, what the desire for luxuries amounted to was investing inappropriate value in bodily satisfactions. An informative illustration comes from the late Stoic philosopher, Epictetus. He is recorded as saying that the purpose of footwear is to protect feet. Once that appropriate or "natural" measure of needfulness is forsaken, then there are no limits and, as a result, there is nothing inappropriate about successively desiring a gilded, a purple, and an embroidered slipper (Epictetus, 1932, §39). It was this limitlessness associated with 'desire' that made it so threatening and, as this example intimates, these gilded slippers are unneeded luxury items.

Viewed from that perspective, life will always appear too short. Those who see matters in this light will become "soft through a life of luxury" and accordingly afraid of death (Seneca, 1932, #78). Such fear is unmanly and illustrates a long-running association of luxury and softness and effeminacy. Pointedly, men who live a life of luxury become effeminate. That is to say they become "soft" and fickle like women, unable to endure hardship and act steadfastly in a virile "manly" fashion, where that means acting in the public arena, including risking death and acting courageously. It is not mere coincidence that in both Greek and Latin the words for "man" have the same root as those for "courage". Such a life has social consequences. A society where luxury is established will devote itself to private, self-regarding ends and men will be unwilling to act for the public good or fight for their patria. This society, it follows, will be militarily weak — a nation of cowards will easily collapse.

A further implication of this weakness was that the desire for luxuries or the valorising of bodily satisfactions corrupted the proper means to provide the basic needs of a natural life. According to Aristotle, the proper locus to provide for those needs was the "household" (*oikos*), which is to be understood as an "estate", not the dwelling of a nuclear family. The task or function of the household was to meet limited needs. This responsibility may, within limits, go beyond the immediate

confines of the estate. Accordingly, olives may be exchanged for some honey, as long as — and these are the limits — the recipient uses the olives for their proper or natural purpose, that is, consumes them. But this process of exchange ("economics") remains an instrumental task subordinate to the intrinsically worthwhile activities that constitute the "good life" of "politics", that is, engagement in matters of general or public concern. If the merely instrumental became instead an end, then that was an unnatural perversion. From this it followed that "economics" was embedded in a moralised context; it had its proper (subordinate) place. This moralisation ultimately rested on a conception of a worthwhile human (male) life of freedom that is debased if it is spent slavishly pursuing merely necessary (unfree) existential ends.

A significant consequence of this moralised hierarchy was that traders or merchants, that is, those who engaged in exchange for a living, lived less than fully human lives. These individuals were thus disparaged. According to Aristotle, for example, in the best "state" (*polis*) those who live a "mercantile life" will not be citizens because such a life is ignoble and inimical to virtue (Aristotle, 1944, 1328b40–41).<sup>2</sup> It was not that men could not adopt the commercial life, but that such a life was unworthy; it was akin, as Seneca and others had observed, to the inferior preoccupation with mere living that was the object of animals, slaves and women. Women, moreover, being weak or soft, craved the delights of luxurious living. For example, according to Livy (1919, bk. 34 §§2–4) Cato described women as having "uncontrollable natures" because they wanted to repeal the *Lex Orchia*, 215 BCE, one of the many Roman sumptuary laws. This particular piece of legislation, inter alia, limited the amount of gold women could possess, forbade them from wearing a coloured cloak and riding in a carriage inside the city. Similar (misogynistic) sentiments were expressed in early Christian thought.<sup>3</sup>

These adornments, along with opulent furnishings, exotic foodstuffs and other goods deemed luxuries by critics were, of course, not supplied by the home estates, but by merchants. This reinforced the judgment that merchants were not merely superfluous, but also potentially corrupting intermediaries. The need-determined exchange of olive and honey was indeed "natural", but traders or merchants functioned to furnish and fuel self-regarding desires, especially for goods to satisfy bodily satisfactions (like embroidered slippers) and their motive for doing so was to enrich themselves. And given the normative hierarchy of ends over means, the actions and motives of merchants were morally suspect. Merchants are motivated by their private interests, whereas a citizen in the full sense, that is, the independent male head of the household, dedicated his life to the common interest or public good.

In sum, luxury constituted a moral threat; it undermined for both individuals and their societies the virtues that come from living where the values of the good life obtain. The negation of this moralised context for luxury centrally concerned a revaluation of the place of desire and the role played by commerce.

Berry (1984, ch. 5) has called this negation "de-moralization". This is a gradual and uneven process. Among the many contributing factors is the impact of Galilean science. This not only overturned Aristotelian physics, it also contributed to the overturning of Aristotelian teleological ethics; the focus is increasingly on "how" things happen, not "why". Isaac Newton

did not know what gravity was, but it was sufficient that it could be measured, and its operation was law-like. Similarly, why pleasure pleases is unknown, but it is sufficient to know that humans like it and their actions are, in consequence, predictable.

What this shift represented was a different reading of human nature. It was this which underwrote the emergence of positive assessments of luxury by establishing the philosophical basis for its demoralisation. The crux was the identification of a regularity or constancy in human motivation that is rooted in the passions, in desire and aversion. It is a predictable constant that all humans move toward whatever pleases them and away from whatever pains them. From which followed a new moral assessment: pleasure is good; pain is bad. The corollary to the universality of passionate motivation is that reason plays an instrumental role; it calculates the best (most efficient) way to bring about what is desired (Hobbes, 1991, ch. 5). This is a reversal of the classical account which saw reason in the role of commander and the bodily passions as subservient. And since on that account to enjoy luxury was to be enslaved by desires then this reversal now permits a re-evaluation of luxury, as a source of pleasure and an incentive to produce the goods to make life better.

Rather than provide a survey of this shift, I will seek to capture it by outlining the argument of David Hume in his essay "Of Refinement of Arts", which on its first appearance in 1752 was entitled "Of Luxury". This essay stands historically at a key point. It builds on or assumes the "new" account of human motivation with its defence of pleasure and critique of austere virtue as well as the defence of commerce, an affirmation (pace Aristotle) of the "noble vocation" of a merchant (Mun, [1664] 1928, p. 3) together with an associated rehabilitation of desire undertaken by theorists of trade, culminating in Bernard Mandeville's notorious *Fable of the Bees* (1988). Hume, in other words, is less an innovator than a brilliant exponent of the shift. On the other hand, to the same effect, after Hume (which is not to say *because* of Hume), the shift has largely been completed. Of course, there are no sharp edges in these matters. There were always moralists about like Henry Thoreau who, in *Walden* ([1854] 2012, p. 12), judged most luxuries to be "positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind", and in the late nineteenth century there was a flurry of publications worried about "luxury" and the development of mass consumption. Moreover, it is possible that some late twentieth and twenty-first century attacks on consumerism can be interpreted in a similar light.

One indication of Hume's historically sensitive situation is his own self-consciousness. He opens his essay by stating that "luxury" is a word of "uncertain signification" (1987, p. 268). He knows full well the position of those "severe moralists" (as he calls them — Sallust is named as an example) that "luxury" is a vice, and he also knows that Mandeville has attacked this line and that it had been taken up more soberly by contemporaries like Jean-François Melon (1734). Against this background, Hume gives his own definition: luxury is "great refinement in the gratification of senses" (Hume, 1987, p. 268). Any thought that this is intended to be read censoriously as an endorsement of the moralists is displaced by his generalising remark that "ages of refinement" are "both the happiest and most virtuous" (1987, p. 269). In a clear break from the moralist tradition, therefore, Hume is coupling luxury/refinement with happiness/virtue, *not* opposing them.

For Hume, happiness comprises repose, pleasure and action (1987, pp. 269–270). Of these, the last is given most weight, but

it is the twist that Hume gives to it that is crucial. The focus is not the Ciceronic *negotium*, with its preoccupation with public or political affairs, but the private endeavour of industry. Where industry abounds, then individuals will be not only opulent, but happy as its members "reap the benefit of...commodities so far as they gratify the senses and appetite" (Hume, 1987, p. 263). If we ask what motivates them, Hume answers "avarice and industry, art and luxury" (ibid.). Since "avarice" was uniformly condemned by the severe moralists, then this statement alone effectively signals the switch in evaluations that has occurred. We can pursue what was involved in that switch by picking up on a further remark of Hume's. As a ratchet effect, humans, when presented with luxury goods, are roused to activity or industry by a "desire of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed" (Hume, 1987, p. 264). Contrary to Epictetus, that desire feeds on desire is now an accurate description of what is natural, of the way the human world works.

The shift away from moralism that Hume's account exemplifies means that luxury can be understood as the opposite of necessity. Once demoralised, a life of necessity now signifies not the austere life of poverty, but an impoverished one, a life of misery. There is nothing ennobling or redemptive about *this* poverty. As Adam Smith put it in the Introduction to the *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981), those who are "miserably poor" are "

frequently reduced or, at least, think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying and sometimes abandoning their infants, their old people and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger or to be devoured by wild beasts (1981, p. 10).

While in a "civilized and thriving country", "universal opulence" extends itself to the "lowest rank of people" (Smith 1981, p. 22), who are able to enjoy "luxury" in their "way of living" (Smith, 1982, p. 489). Once luxury is seen in this light, then its development into the lexicon of "ad speak" can be understood. "Luxury" can, without hesitation, be tacked on adjectivally to almost any article of merchandise from pizzas to handbags, from a fountain pen to an apartment and to hotels. The adjective is attached presumably to make the "good" more desirable and thus more likely to be bought. Of course, no one *needs* a pair of embroidered slippers, the decorativeness of which is superfluous. But from the demoralised perspective, embroidered slippers are more pleasing than plain ones, and where is the harm in that pleasure? Moreover, think of all the extra industry generated and employment created by the desire to have those exquisitely produced slippers and think, too, of the economic benefits that will flow from my desire next year to own an even more fashionable and luxurious pair.

The dynamism of desire in this way fuels the engine of modern economies. One way of depicting this dynamism is to chart the seemingly never-ceasing transformation of luxuries into necessities. This transformation demonstrates that, whereas in the world of Seneca and others, luxury (bad) and poverty (good) stood as categorically opposed ways of life, in the modern world, luxury is only contingently contrasted with necessity; they are points on a single scale or continuum. There is a further dimension to this dynamism. Since any alteration to Epictetus' functional slipper is unwarranted then there is seemingly no place for change or innovation. One of the striking things about the classical critique of luxury was that very often in practice it aimed to sustain a hierarchical status quo.

The prevalence of sumptuary legislation from the Romans through to the eighteenth century in some societies bears this out. A central concern in these laws was to preserve the pecking order, to attempt through display to maintain "distance" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 58), and thus to confine the incidence of a good and prevent its diffusion. Luxury, "new" wealth, always threatened to overturn this. Those in the lower ranks of these societies may well have wanted some of those privileged goods, but that "wanting" was a mark of their unworthiness, since they desired them for their own personal use. The decline of sumptuary laws is a marker not necessarily of greater economic equality, but of the wish of individuals (consumers) to be free according to their own preferences, to get delight and pleasure from attractive clothes, delicious meals, comfortable homes and enjoyable holidays. And that wish itself signals the recognition that the desire on the part of the "have-nots" to those goods currently possessed by the "haves" is legitimate. This morally endorsed combination was captured by Smith (1982, p. 185) in his Glasgow lectures when he professed that the "opulence and freedom" were the "two greatest blessings men can possess".

Contemporary luxury is just a particular subset of adjectives. Clothing, food, accommodation and leisure remain the basic categories of desired goods (Berry, 1984, ch. 1). A Dior dress, a Michelin-star meal, a 5th Avenue penthouse and a stay at The Ritz are each qualitative refinements of those four categories of commonly shared desires. From this, it is easy to appreciate what a five-star hotel will seek to offer — space, high-quality toiletries and bathrobes, excellent service, a spa, a gym, its own Michelin-starred restaurant and so on, all alongside the provision of an experience to be treasured. In sum, as the acme of luxury, it pampers the body and provides well-being.

## Note

1. This article draws on Berry (1995; 1999; 2005).
2. Similar sentiments can be found in Plato and Xenophon, while among Roman authors, Cicero (1913, 1, §150) for example, judged merchants to be engaged in a sordid or demeaning activity; indeed, they have to tell lies to make a living.
3. See the fulminations of Clement of Alexandria (1891, pp. 439–440) and Tertullian (1869, p. 331), who strikingly refer to female luxury as effeminising the manliness of faith (*fidei virtus effeminari*). The role of Eve, as first manifesting weakness by succumbing to the wiles of the serpent and then exhibiting guile to get Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, added another dimension to this misogyny. From the Christian fathers to the Middle Ages, "luxury" was conterminous with "lust".

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